

CES HR Questions
Federal Appointments and Benefits

What effect will SEC. 7220 of the Farm Bill of 2002 have on the Federal Schedule A appointees?

SEC. 7220 (a) requires the termination of the Federal Schedule A appointments and the termination will be effective 1/31/03. However, if the Federal appointee was participating in or was eligible to participate in the following Federal benefit programs on May 12, 2002, they will continue to be eligible to participate in these programs only:

- Federal Employees Health Benefits Program (FEHB);
- Federal Employee Group Life Insurance Program (FEGLI);
- Civil Service Retirement System (CSRS);
- Federal Employee Retirement System (FERS);
- Thrift Savings Plan (TSP);
- Federal Long Term Care Insurance Program (FLTCIP).

A. BENEFITS

Q1. Will the employee continue to receive creditable service towards Federal retirement after 1/31/03?

A1. Yes. All CES service after 1/31/03 will continue to be creditable for Federal retirement as long as the employee continues to meet the following employment conditions:

1. Formally employed in a Cooperative Extension Service(CES) organization;
2. Perform at least 50% Extension function; and
3. Extension function must be performed on a permanent basis and year round.

Q2. If a CES organization permits 9-month appointment arrangements, can the employee elect this type of an arrangement and continue their Federal benefits?

A2. No. Federal benefits are based on a permanent year round arrangement with Extension functions being performed throughout the entire year. The appointing authority granted to USDA and CES from the Office of Personnel Management was based on the fact that the employees would be permanent, i.e., appointed without any limitations on the Federal appointments; and that the employees would work 12 months a year and make full-time (2080/2087 hours) annual contributions to the retirement fund based on their perspective pay periods, e.g., bi-weekly, monthly, 1st and the 15th of each month, etc. Multiple appointment arrangements which equate to 12 months, such as a 9 month appointment and a 3 month summer appointment are not permissible either.

Q3. If the employee has deposit or redeposit service, will they be able to make these deposits after 1/31/03?

A3. Yes. All creditable service will continue to be creditable service after 1/31/03 and any creditable service that requires a deposit or redeposit in order for the service to be creditable for retirement purposes will be permitted under the Federal regulations.

Q4. Will the employee be able to request and receive a refund for excess contributions after 1/31/03 and before they plan to retire?

A4. Yes. If an employee has excess contributions, they can request a refund after 1/31/03.

Q5. Will the employees be able to participate in new Federal benefits programs that are available to other Federal employees after 1/31/03?

A5. No. Employees will only be eligible to participate in the following programs and only if they were eligible to participate in them on May 12, 2002.

- FEHB
- FEGLI
- CSRS
- FERS
- TSP
- FLTCIP

Note: Changes and new features for the current Federal Benefits programs such as FEHB, FEGLI, TSP and FLTCIP will be offered to the CES organizations and employees that are eligible to participate in the affected program(s).

Q6. Can the employees participate in open seasons for Federal health and life insurance, long term care, Thrift Savings Plan, and FERS?

A6. Yes. CES employees who were eligible on May 12, 2002, to participate in these plans will be able to participate in the FEHB, FEGLI, FLTCIP, and FERS open seasons held after 1/31/03 even if they were not enrolled prior to May 12, 2002.

Q7. If the employees can participate in the open seasons can they go from not enrolled to enrolled for health and life insurance, long term care, and Thrift Savings Plan during the open season?

A7. Yes. CES employees who were eligible on May 12, 2002, to participate in these plans will be able to enroll during the FEHB, FEGLI, and FLTCIP open seasons held after 1/31/03.

- Q8. Will the Federal appointees be able to continue to participate in the Federal Health Premium Conversion (HB-PC) plan if their CES organization participates in it?
- A8. Yes. The employees can continue to participate in the Federal HB-PC plan.
- Q9. If the Federal appointee participates in their state's Premium Conversion (PC) for FEHB, are they subject to the provisions of the Federal HB-PC?
- A9. They are subject to the provisions of the Federal HB-PC, even though they are covered by the state's PC. Federal appointees will be able to change from family to self only at any time IF the employee files a waiver in accordance with the Federal HB-PC plan.
- Q10. Will the employee and agency contributions and deductions continue to be the same as the rates and costs for other Federal employees for the same Federal benefits?
- A10. Yes. The contributions and deductions will continue to be the same as the rates and costs for other Federal employees.
- Q11. How will the employee receive information on the changes and updates to the Federal benefits and retirement program?
- A11. Information on updates and changes to the Federal programs will continue to come from the Metropolitan Services Branch (MSB) CES Team. In addition, the Guidance on Federal Human Resources and Benefits for Cooperative Extension Service will be updated regularly to reflect current information. This publication is maintained on the CSREES web site (www.csrees.usda.gov/about/human_res/cesguide/ceshr_index.html).
- Q12. Who will be responsible for signing Federal benefits forms?
- A12. Employees in the university/college CES Human Resources (HR) offices who now sign these forms will continue to do so based on a delegation of authority from CES Director or Administrator..
- Q13. Who is responsible for providing advice and assistance to former Schedule A appointees on their Federal benefits and retirement?
- A13. The CES HR offices, in conjunction with the MSB CES Team, will continue to provide guidance and information on Federal benefits and retirement to the employees.

B. RECORD KEEPING

- Q14. Will the CES HR offices have to continue to maintain the Federal Official Personnel Folder (OPF)?
- A14. Yes. OPF's will be maintained after 1/31/03. While there will be no further CES-436's

personnel actions processed after 1/31/03, copies of benefits forms and changes will be processed in accordance with Federal policy and procedures. Copies of these documents will continue to be maintained in the OPF's.

Q15. What files other than the OPF must the CES HR offices maintain?

A15. It will be necessary to maintain all of the files that were maintained on 1/31/03. Files include documents to support payroll and files used to maintain the official record of withholding and deductions for the Federal benefits and retirement programs.

Q16. What records, other than the SF-2806 - CSRS Retirement Card, and the SF-3100 - FERS Retirement Card, will need to be maintained by the CES HR offices?

A16. Records of payments on Federal benefits must be maintained in the same manner that they are currently being maintained. In addition, forms to change health insurance, life insurance, and TSP contributions must also be maintained in the OPF. These documents will serve as the official records of benefits when an employee resigns, retires, or transfers to another CES or other Federal agency. The only record that no longer needs to be processed and maintained is the CES-436.

Q17. Will the CES HR/Payroll offices continue to record contributions and payments on the corresponding forms, records, and systems?

A17. Yes. It's business as usual with these records.

Q18. Will the CES HR offices continue to be responsible for Federal Office of Workers' Compensation Program (OWCP) claims?

A18. Federal claims for OWCP benefits filed prior to 2/1/03 will continue to be the responsibility of CES, USDA, and Department of Labor. No new Federal OWCP claims will be filed after 1/31/03.

Q19. Will the CES HR offices continue to work with the MSB CES Team on budget issues, i.e., OWCP chargebacks, agency (government contributions), budget etc.

A19. Yes. The MSB CES Team will continue to be responsible for the existing Federal OWCP charges and Federal OWCP claims. The USDA CSREES staff will continue to work with the CES organizations on budget matters.

C. PERSONNEL ACTIONS

Q20. Will the CES HR offices need to continue to process the CES-436, Notification of Personnel Action?

A20. CES-436's will be processed from 5/15/02 to 01/31/03. After 01/31/03, they will no longer be generated.

Q21. Is there still a need for a Federal Retirement Officer/Benefits Coordinator to oversee and maintain the Federal program as it relates to the Federal benefits and retirement programs for CES employees after 1/31/03?

A21. Yes. The Federal programs will continue to be a joint effort between Office of Personnel Management (OPM)/USDA and the CES organizations that have employees with Federal benefits and retirement.

Q22. Will there be a change in the way payments for Federal benefits are processed?

A22. At the present time, the MSB CES Team we does not anticipate any changes other than the changes currently in progress for OPM's FEHB centralized enrollment clearinghouse (CLER) project at the USDA National Finance Center in New Orleans, Louisiana.

D. SEPARATION ACTIONS

Q23. Will the CES Federal Retirement Officer/Benefits Coordinator continue to counsel former Federal appointees on their Federal retirement program?

A23. Yes. Former Federal appointees will need to receive counseling from their CES HR office.

Q24. Will the CES HR offices continue to prepare the retirement application packages for former Federal appointees?

A24. Yes. CES organizations will continue to be responsible for preparing the retirement application packages and forwarding the packages to OPM.

Q25. Who will prepare, approve, and sign the Federal retirement documents?

A25. Employees in the university/college CES HR offices who now sign these forms will continue to do so based on a delegation of authority from their CES Director or Administrator.

Q26. Will the CES organizations be able to participate in the Federal early retirement programs?

A26. Yes.

Q27. Will the MSB CES Team continue to be responsible for providing policy and guidance on the Federal benefits and retirement programs for CES former Federal appointees?

A27. Yes.

Q28. Will the CES HR offices work with OPM officials or the CES MSB Team on Federal benefits and retirement programs?

A28. The CES HR offices will continue to work with the MSB CES Team on policy and procedures and they will provide guidance and assistance to all CES organizations on the Federal benefits programs.

CES organizations will continue to work with OPM's Retirement Section in Boyers, Pennsylvania on individual retirement actions submitted to them for processing. However, problems that involve the retirement coverage determination, prior service, crediting sick leave for retirements, and the Service Computation Date (SCD) for Retirement should be referred to and discussed with the MSB CES Team.

Q29. Who will be our contact for Federal HR benefits and retirement program issues?

A29. MSB CES Team contacts are listed at www.csrees.usda.gov/about/human_res/cesspt.html or you may call the central telephone number on 202-720-7659.